

VZCZCXRO0619
OO RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHMK #0113/01 0381421
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 071421Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6385
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 1290
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 0656
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 0892
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 1180
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0976
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0889
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 3578
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 2631
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000113

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/07/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT VIEWS ARRESTS AS SENDING A SIGNAL TO
ACTIVISTS

REF: MANAMA 0096

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

.

Summary

¶1. (C) In separate discussions, Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid and Industry and Commerce Minister Fakhro both told the Ambassador that the government arrested Shia activists Mushaima and Al Khawaja to rein in their unlawful activities, which the government believes have become increasingly defiant. Shaikh Khalid stressed the arrests had nothing to do with the government's relations with the broader Shia community and cited the helpful role Shia political society Al Wifaq has played. A journalist told the Ambassador that elements within the ruling Al Khalifa family are furious at the activists for their continuing to "carry on," and are angry at the King for allowing this to happen and for his previous leniency with Shia hardliners. In a press conference, Mushaima and Al Khawaja shifted the focus from their alleged crimes to their right of freedom of speech and calls for an investigation of accusations against government figures contained in the September 2006 Al Bandar report. With battle lines hardening on this case, and an already difficult regional environment, relations between Bahrain's Sunni and Shia communities could become increasingly tense. End Summary.

No Broad Move Against Shias

¶2. (C) In separate encounters over the past few days, Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa and Minister of Industry and Commerce (and King confidant) Hassan Fakhro told the Ambassador that the government had to take steps to rein in prominent opposition activists Hassan Mushaima and Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, who were arrested, interrogated, charged, and released on their own recognizance on February 2. In a February 6 meeting, Shaikh Khalid said the arrests had nothing to do with the broader Shia community. The government's actions should be seen only as a move against Mushaima, who is Secretary General of the (unregistered) Haq Movement, Al Khawaja, former president of the now dissolved Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and Shaker

Abdul Hussein, an activist in the (unregistered) Committee for the Unemployed.

13. (C) Leading Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq, Shaikh Khalid said, had nothing to do with Mushaima and Al Khawaja and is not being held responsible for them. In fact, Al Wifaq and its leader (and MP) Shaikh Ali Salman have played a useful role by serving as an intermediary between the government and the larger Shia community on the case. He mentioned that Salman had been in a meeting with Minister of Interior Shaikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa at the time of the activists' release from detention. He said that he, Shaikh Rashid, and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (and former Al Wifaq member) Nizar Al Baharna had all been in touch with Salman as the case developed.

Rule of Law, or Rule of the Street

14. (C) Shaikh Khalid said that Mushaima and Al Khawaja were responsible for provoking the incident by their incitement. The government had been faced with a choice - abiding by the rule of law, which encompasses everyone, or accepting the rule of the street. Mushaima, Shaikh Khalid claimed, had said that he did not accept the legitimacy of Bahrain's courts or laws; rather he recognizes the "power of young men on the streets." Bahrain is committed to political reform and democratic participation, Shaikh Khalid said, "and we're not going back." But Mushaima and Al Khawaja were trying to undermine the government and even more so Al Wifaq, now that its representatives have been elected to parliament. The King has said that he wants a good parliament and "not a

MANAMA 00000113 002 OF 003

waste of time," and by the actions of a few extremists, Al Wifaq is now distracted from its focus on working in parliament and reviewing laws, Shaikh Khalid complained.

Drawing a Line in the Sand

15. (C) In a February 5 encounter on the margins of a meeting with visiting Deputy Secretary of Commerce Sampson, Minister of Industry and Commerce Fakhro, who is among the most liberal and cosmopolitan of Bahrain's leaders, told the Ambassador that the government had been compelled to act against Mushaima and Al Khawaja because they continued to push the limit of lawfully acceptable public speech. The King had acted with leniency in previous cases involving Al Khawaja and Haq Movement activists, and they likely felt they could get away with yet more escalation of anti-regime rhetoric. Fakhro said the government had to act to draw a line in the sand and send a clear signal that it would not tolerate further provocations.

16. (C) In a February 4 conversation, well-informed journalist Habib Toumi told the Ambassador that elements within the Al Khalifa family are furious at Shia extremists for "carrying on like this" and are mad at the King for allowing this to happen and for his previous leniency. He provided additional details on Al Khawaja's January 29 speech, which led to his arrest. According to this account, Al Khawaja wanted to hold a meeting at a matam (Shia religious community center), but prominent cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem refused his request. So he set up a booth at a busy intersection next to the matam during the crowded Ashoura processions and held it there. An unidentified Saudi Shia gave a fiery speech critical of the King. Al Khawaja followed him and, in contrast with the 2004 speech for which he was arrested and convicted for criticizing the Prime Minister, allegedly went directly after the King, hurling Arabic insults like, "his arms should be paralyzed" and other colorful language.

Police Frustration

¶7. (C) A mid-level security official told A/RSO immediately following the February 2 clashes with Shia youth that some police officers (all of whom are Sunni) feel frustrated that after they confront, control, and sometimes arrest rioters, the government often releases them. He expressed his sense of futility with the way the government deals with these types of situations.

Activists Believe in Rights, Not Laws

¶8. (SBU) Mushaima and Al Khawaja held a press conference February 4 during which they said their release from detention came as a result of pressure from protesters in the street and the support of opposition groups, including Al Wifaq. Mushaima said, "Al Wifaq's response surprised the authorities and affirmed the solidarity of the opposition." Mushaima also said that the Haq Movement believes that legislation covering the registration of political societies is unconstitutional and the Movement believes in its right ("haq") and not laws. Al Khawaja echoed this sentiment, saying, "Mushaima and I have discussed and agreed that we should not respond to the legal measures to be taken by the Bahraini government because the penal code is unconstitutional and is not consistent with international standards." He accuses the public prosecution and judiciary of not being independent or fair and cites the U.S. Department of State as agreeing with this characterization. (Note: Presumably a reference to the Human Rights Report, which states, "the judiciary is not independent, and courts were subject to government pressure regarding verdicts, sentencing, and appeals.")

¶9. (SBU) In the press conference, the two activists attempted to shift the focus from the government's charges

MANAMA 00000113 003 OF 003

against them to other issues. Mushaima said that his speeches during Ashoura had nothing to do with the crimes he allegedly committed. To him, the issue is freedom of speech, which is guaranteed by the Bahraini constitution and is recognized by Islam. Both Mushaima and Al Khawaja said their arrests were prompted by their continued demands for an investigation into the accusations made in the September 2006 report by Salah Al Bandar, which claimed that members of the ruling family tried to manipulate the political system.

Columnists Condemn Activists

¶10. (SBU) In her February 6 article, columnist Sawsan Al Shaer asks, "which state are we living in - Mushaima and Al Khawaja's state or the state of the rule of law?" She faults Mushaima for rejecting Bahrain's laws and claiming that he was released from detention because of the streets actions of protesters. Columnist Hafedh Al Shaikh calls on the government to enforce the law and take the three activists to court. "Even if there is violence and demonstrations afterwards, the government must not pardon the vulgar and barbaric forces that instigate the street," he writes.

Comment

¶11. (C) With battle lines developing between hardline Shia activists and elements within the ruling family, an inevitable victim is cordial relations between the sects. As discussed reftel, Al Wifaq felt compelled to align itself more closely with its extremist rivals in order to maintain

credibility in the eyes of Shia Bahrainis. With some in the government defining the case in terms of drawing a line in the sand and sending a clear signal to hardline Shias, many moderate Sunnis will likely come to view Mushaima and Al Khawaja's actions as defiance of governmental authority, as the insightful columnist Al Shaer already does. With a difficult regional environment already in place, relations between Bahrain's Sunni and Shia communities could become increasingly tense.

Visit Embassy Manama's Classified Website:

<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/manama/>

MONROE